

A Visual Investigation of Fetish in Contemporary Society

by
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Signed statement of originality

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A handwritten signature in black ink. The first part of the signature is a stylized cursive 'Shaun' followed by a horizontal line. The second part is 'McGowan' written in a more formal, slightly cursive script, also followed by a horizontal line.

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Shaun McGowan

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Abstract

This project is a visual investigation of fetish in contemporary society, developed through the selection and representation of collected objects, with a particular focus on toys.

Various definitions of fetish are explored through its development in the modern world, from its first use to describe a religious object in the fifteenth century, to the use of the term fetish in an economic sense by Karl Marx, and to the use of fetish in a psychological sense by Sigmund Freud. Contemporary understanding of the term fetish is further developed to explore the role that the readymade object plays in society as described by cultural theorist William Pietz. A context in Fine Art is offered historically through Andy Warhol and his repetitions of popular culture iconography, and in a more contemporaneous sense by the work of Zoe Leonard, Wolfgang Laib and the Chapman Brothers.

This investigation is carried out through the production and presentation of sculpture. Objects are sourced from the everyday world; manipulated, and represented to explore and develop ideas about the role that fetish plays in the contemporary world. Objects that are sourced for this project are chosen to explore the changing and varied definition of fetish. These include objects of mass consumption and advertising such as commercial toys, spiritual or religious objects such as icons or statues, and objects that are regarded as having a more contemporary and personal sense of fetish.

Fetish is shown through the project to be a valid descriptor of certain relationships to objects in the world. Toys were used to drive an investigation of fetish throughout the project, and fulfil the definitions of what fetish might be. The project has shown that fetish is a term that can be widely used in culture to describe relationships to objects.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

- 1.1 AIMS OF RESEARCH
- 1.2 BACKGROUND TO PROJECT
- 1.3 PARAMETERS TO PROJECT
- 1.4 SIGNIFICANCE IN FIELD
- 1.5 TOYS
- 1.6 OTHER COLLECTED OBJECTS

CHAPTER 2

- 2.1 CONTEXT
- 2.2 ARTISTS

CHAPTER 3

- 3.1 HOW THE PROJECT WAS PURSUED

CHAPTER 4

- 4.1 WORK INCLUDED IN THE FINAL EXHIBITION
- 4.2 LISTED WORKS

CONCLUSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 1

1.1 AIMS OF RESEARCH

This project is a visual investigation of fetish¹ in contemporary society, developed through the selection and representation of collected objects, with a particular focus on toys.

The project develops an interpretation of the term fetish, taking into account its many definitions. Presenting collected objects, or objects derived from these, the project then through sculptures and installations explores the nature of some aspects of fetish in contemporary society.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO PROJECT

This project is stimulated by an interest in the production and distribution of toys in contemporary society. I have been fascinated by the huge increase in both the quantity and content of the small plastic figure, and especially by those toys that are a part of some larger marketing context, exemplified by those modelled from the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games mascots and distributed through McDonalds². Being an avid collector, there seems an endless stream of new opportunities through small plastic toys, such as new myth and associations, better modelling and finer material.

My initial proposition explored the notion that toys perform a spiritual function, that they act in a way akin to a fetish, idol or icon. I felt a strong attraction to them as objects, and was interested in exploring their relevance to issues within contemporary art, and in the meaning they might have for children and the broader society.

This followed the consideration that we do most of our spiritual groundwork as children. When engaged within the magical arena of childhood we are able to explore and test ideas of how the world works, of how we are to behave in this world, and do so in an environment where even the most esoteric spiritual ideas can

¹The Macquarie Dictionary describes fetish as;
A material, commonly an inanimate object, regarded with awe as being the embodiment or habitation of a potent spirit or as having magical potency because of the materials and methods used in compounding it.

Any object of blind reverence.

An obsession or fixation, expressed in ritualistic behaviour.

² McDonalds is a large multinational corporation specializing in fast food.

seem concrete. By the time we grow to adulthood much of our personality and character has been resolved through these explorations. We move out of the magical realm and we are able to participate in a more ordinary, secular life.

Reviewing the literature on early childhood development revealed the initial proposition to be readily apparent. Given the way in which children interact with the world, all objects have a spiritual potential. The toy has properties that are shared by religious objects because that is how the child views the object during play.³ That play itself has a ritual; a ceremonial role is also evident, obscured perhaps by the seriousness with which the adult world generally approaches spiritual concerns.⁴

Background research for this project led me to explore the idea that an understanding of fetish, in its historical and contemporary manifestations, might help to reveal some of the nature of the contemporary toy. More powerfully perhaps, toys might reveal something about the nature of fetish in contemporary society.

1.3 PARAMETERS OF RESEARCH

The parameters of the research for this project include a visual investigation of fetish in contemporary art with an emphasis on collecting and choosing objects. The project is stimulated by an interest in collecting objects from popular culture and is driven by the making of sculpture. This process of collecting and making has led to an interest in certain types of objects, such as toys, manifested as sculpture.

These objects are explored using the various descriptors of the term fetish. Other descriptors for the object and its cultural relationships were considered, such as icon⁵ and idol⁶; these are informative but too narrow and religious. Both terms generally refer to objects that act largely as a mnemonic, a spiritual device to bring to mind certain ideas and states of mind. The term totem has resonance, but is based on a belief in an “eternal soul”. Emile Durkheim writes that the totem “is before all a symbol”⁷, a symbol of a clan god and its society. For those in that community the idea of immanence⁸ is shared between the totemic object, plant or

³ Piaget, Jean: *The Child's Conception of the World*. Pp 236-286 Paladin (London 1973)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Icon; n. Image. Statue; (Orthodox ch.) painting, mosaic etc of sacred personage, itself regarded as sacred. In; *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

⁶ Idol; n. Image of deity used as an object of worship; false god; person or thing that is the object of excessive devotion; (arch) phantom. In; *Concise Oxford Dictionary*

⁷ Durkheim, Emile: “The Elementary forms of Religious Life.” p.34 In; Lessa, William. *Reader in Comparative Religion* 1979 New York Harper & Rowe Publishers

⁸ Immanence; Indwelling, remaining within, inherent. Macquarie Dictionary.

animal and the people of that clan. Although Durkheim also writes that “ a sacred character is to a high degree contagious; it spreads out from the totemic being to everything that is closely or remotely connected with it”⁹, the objects in this belief system derive their power from a person, whereas the objects that are considered in this project explore a belief system that grants all objects immanent qualities.

The Australian Aboriginal belief system is reflected in their regard for Tjuringa, sacred objects central to the clan system. A father giving his son a stone Tjuringa upon his initiation is recorded as saying “ this is your own body from which you have been reborn.”¹⁰ The anthropologist Strehlow reports another case where a Tjuringa had been chipped, “ It was not permitted to smooth the edge, because the Tjuringa was regarded as the now changed body of the ancestral spirit.”¹¹ Although a person forms a relationship to the object, it is because the object is already powerful. Fetish in its contemporary sense does this.

The term fetish first appears in European cultural dialogue with relation to the Portuguese colonial presence in West Africa in the fifteenth century. These explorers came across certain votive objects, carved wooden images of gods heavily embellished with iron nails. These they called ‘feitizo’, from the Portuguese term for magic.

Each nail driven into the votive form is a type of prayer or meditation. The devotee would come to the figure and hammer in a nail, literally driving their desire or supplication into the god. Both the prayer and the object of their prayer, the god/form, are real things in the world. For the colonial Portuguese these objects were outside their experience of a spiritual image and were treated with fear and suspicion.

“Often African statues are called fetishes and today everyone uses this word: it explains nothing, however, and it can mean anything you want it to. It hides the true meaning of those sculptures from us, and above all, it hides our ignorance. Under the conditioning weight of the word ‘fetish’ one loses all true meaning of the object.”¹²

⁹ Durkheim: p31

¹⁰ Stockton, Eugene: *The Aboriginal Gift*. Millenium Books Sydney 1995 p.93

¹¹ Ibid. p.93

¹² Quilici, Folco: *The Mysterious World of Magic*. Bay Books Sydney 1980 pp.104

Figure 1. Nail Fetish of the Loango Coast.

This was a form of spiritual object that transforms desire, but within a tradition that seemed outside the European sense of spiritual supplication. Other European writers expanded upon this theme through the colonial period, noting the “non-European overvaluing of trinkets and trifles”¹³, positing the fetish as an object of otherness. The term fetish was also drawn into the Protestant critique of Roman Catholic imagery¹⁴. The Reformation brought with it an examination of materialism and occasional outbursts of iconoclasm. Protestant reformers were suspicious of an unseemly attachment to objects or the things of the world.



A new reading of our understanding of the term fetish came with Karl Marx’s epic social and economic treatise, ‘Capital’. In attempting his examination of social economy, Marx needed to describe the nature of the traded object, the commodity, and its relation to both capital and the worker. Marx felt that this was no simple matter. He borrows from the developing European critique of objects by Protestant clergy.

In trying to pin down the true nature of the commodity, Karl Marx writes “to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the nebulous regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is, in the world of commodities, with the products of men’s hands. This I call the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

This fetishism of commodities has as its origin....in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them.”¹⁵

Through Marx’s writings he identifies a transformed desire, resultant upon alienation of a worker from the products of their labour, which is transacted in a

¹³ James Kearney; “The Book and the Fetish: The Materiality of Prospero’s Text.” In: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.3 (2002) pp. 433-468

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karl Marx. Capital 1 (1867) v1, p.77-8. In Karl Marx; *Selected writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*. Penguin London 1956

commodity relationship. Marx called this transformed desire commodity fetishism. Perhaps the most glaring example of the construction of fetish within a commodity is the socially determined decoration of paper, turning it into cash. In a fully capitalised system, most everything is commodified, air and water, sex and death, certainly childhood.

For the purposes of this project, toys in their material abundance assume the qualities of the commodity fetish. They are a product, a sculptural material, vastly alienated from the workers who construct them, labouring long hours at subsistent wages in dangerous workplaces, sometimes in slavery.¹⁶ Children are frequently the exploited workers who make the toys used in this project.¹⁷ The toys they make are distributed, in a strange quirk of late capitalism, largely as food additives. One of the largest players in this industry is a joint corporation, McDonalds / Disney¹⁸. That Ray Kroc, legendary founder of the McDonalds chain of food stores, was in the same ambulance unit as Walt Disney in the First World War is perhaps coincidental.¹⁹ Never-the-less, a large proportion of all small figures presented as toys are produced and distributed through McDonalds / Disney or at least this was true until they dissolved their relationship in May 2006²⁰. Disney has moved to dissolve this relationship with McDonalds in order to protect their reputation, as the advertising of food to children comes under greater scrutiny in the United States of America. Although other qualities associated with fetish are present within some toys, particularly spiritual qualities, it is their materiality that is represented by their abundance in this project,

For much of the twentieth century, the idea of fetish has been dominated in the public mind by the writings of Sigmund Freud. In presenting a series of psychoanalytic case studies Freud introduced the use of the term fetish as an expression of childhood sublimation. Concepts that a developing child found difficult to integrate would be sublimated into some other behaviour, belief or object. Most famously, a male child's anxiety about the status of his mother's penis might then lead to a sexual attachment to feet.²¹ From this rarefied atmosphere of psychoanalytic behavioural study has sprung the widely held popular notion of

¹⁶ McDonald, Hamish; 'The Wages of Fun'; in *The Age*, 8/11/2004

¹⁷ Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee: 'We Protest against McDonalds Repudiation of Facts and its Responsibility'.

In; www.org.hk/download/Statement%204.doc

¹⁸ Disney is a large multinational corporation specializing in entertainment.

¹⁹ Love, F. John: *McDonalds; Behind the Arches*. p.31 Bantam New York 1986

²⁰ 'The McDonalds and Disney breakup'.

In; www.newsnet.byu.edu/story.cfm/95824.

²¹ Freud, Sigmund: "Fetishism." 1928 In: *Standard edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. p.152-157

fetish as an expression of sexual abnormality.

The term fetish has now come to be used over a range of disciplines. An understanding of fetish has been explored widely in the period since Freud's writings, academically, and in popular culture. Writers such as W. D. Winnicott have used the idea of fetish to understand the developing relationship to the object in early childhood.²² Freud's essay on Leonardo da Vinci, which speaks of "passion transformed", informs Hans Loewald's study of sublimation.²³ Bataille²⁴ and Hal Foster²⁵ have interesting insights with relation to fetish and the object. In popular culture the idea of fetish has flourished through a pervasive materialism, and more particularly in subcultural expression. The story about Michel Foucault being pulled out of a urinal in a New York bathhouse to deliver a lecture on the subject seems apocryphal²⁶.

A contemporary interpretation of the use of the term fetish has been given by cultural theorist William Pietz. Pietz particularly examines how the term has been used in a wide, but connecting group of meanings over a disparate group of disciplines. He gives four themes, which he feels "consistently inform the idea of fetish"²⁷.

These are firstly that of "the untranscended materiality of the fetish", or that the object acts as "the locus of religious activity or psychic investment"²⁸. That is, the object has immanent qualities.

Secondly, "the radical historicity of the fetish's origin: rising in a singular event fixing together otherwise heterogeneous elements, the identity and power of the fetish consists of fixation, along with the resultant effect."²⁹ So, a relationship with a fetish is something that occurs because of a cause or belief, and this results in a sublimated relationship, from the cause to the fetish.

Thirdly, "the dependence of the fetish for its meaning and value in a particular order of social relations, which it in turn reinforces."³⁰ This describes an object that occurs in a cultural context, where a relationship between a person and a fetish occurs in culture, and this relationship by its existence reinforces its value.

²² Winnicott, W. D; *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock: London 1971

²³ Loewald, H.W: *Sublimation; Inquiries into Theoretical Psychoanalysis*. pp9-10 Yale University Press: New Haven and London 1988

²⁴ Bataille, Georges: *Theory of Religion*. Zone Books: New York 1992

²⁵ Foster, Hal. *The Art of Fetishism*. Princeton Architectural Press 1992

²⁶ Private conversation in Melbourne bathhouse.

²⁷ Pietz, William: "The Problem of the Fetish". Pp 5-17 Res. *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 1985

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid.

Finally, Pietz writes that there should be “an active relation of the fetish to the living body of an individual: a kind of external controlling organ directed by powers outside the affected persons will, the fetish represents a subversion of the ideal of the autonomously determined self.”³¹ This last theme, in developing an understanding of fetish, shows that although a fetish is occasioned by actions within the person for whom the fetish operates, the fetish enters into the relationship on some sort of equal footing. Fetish is not just the object of desire; it has power and intent of its own. Having this relationship to an object may well be read as demeaning the humanity of the person for whom the fetish relationship operates.

What Pietz describes as fetish in an object is something that exists in a context, something desired by a person, where the power in the object lies with the object. The fetish is no substitute, it is the thing itself.

What is interesting with regard to this project is how this understanding informs the process by which children consume toys. As children might regard many objects as being immanent, as having qualities that are of the fetish, what does this mean for children’s regard for toys in particular? It is the aspect of mass consumption, the drive by advertisers and producers for a constant stream of new figures that gives us its contemporary manifestation. In this repeated consumption of immanent objects, the eating of god, we have perhaps the urge to addictivity.³²

This understanding of fetish is explored through the presentation of objects as sculpture. The term fetish can be seen to have altered and grown over time, to where it has become a term with deep relevance to the contemporary object. Contemporary objects may coincidentally be objects of commercial, sensual and/or spiritual desire. Fetish in its many forms describes both constructed objects and collected objects in this project. Fetish also informs the nature of the sculptural practice, in particular collecting. Foremost among the collected objects is the toy.

1.4 TOYS

The initial stimulus to this project was provided by the tremendous increase in small plastic figurative toys, in both variety and abundance. This increase is driven by modern commercial concerns, where products are integrated into vertical marketing systems. A vertical marketing system is one that takes a product or brand

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ronell, Avital. *Crack Wars; Literature, Addiction, Mania*. University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London 1992

and markets this over a range of different consumer functions. With a toy, this might start with a character in a fable or children's book. This will be illustrated and designed, made into a film, given over to a sculptor to make a figurine, which will provide a souvenir of an 'integrated' experience to take home. More broadly, perfume companies, hardware companies, football clubs and motorcycle manufacturers now produce toys to introduce their brands to a wider marketplace.

Although *Barbie*³³ and *Sindy* were the first truly branded toys to go global, it was the *Dalek* that has the honour of being the first vertically marketed character. The BBC had, in the 1960's, set up a marketing department called TV Enterprises. Following the success of the *Dr Who* television series a flood of *Dalek* products were available. "By 1965 you could buy mobile *Daleks* large enough for a child to get inside; stand up inflatable *Daleks*; battery-operated *Daleks*; clockwork *Daleks* and mini-*Daleks*...*Dalek* slippers, playsuits, comics, jig-saws, box games, writing pads, and...a water pistol."³⁴

This trend has grown; the *Telletubbies* on launch were translated into 24 languages, delivered to 132 countries with a potential audience of 1 billion children.³⁵ The brand could be accessed through a range of clothing, entertainments and toys.

Figure 2.

Tinky-Winky, Laa-Laa, Po and Dipsy.



The flood of objects that are the contemporary toy industry was interesting for reasons other than its representation of capitalism and culture today. I felt that toys are special objects, and that "the forms of play give a sense of the social fabric: its definitions of freedom, of what is sacred, and its sensibility of order."³⁶ As an artist I trusted the process that drew me to these objects, sacred, profane, and yet something else.

³³ First manufactured by Mattel in 1959.

³⁴ Fawdry, Kenneth & Fawdry, Marguerite: *Pollock's History of English Dolls & Toys*. p.16 Ernest Benn 1979.

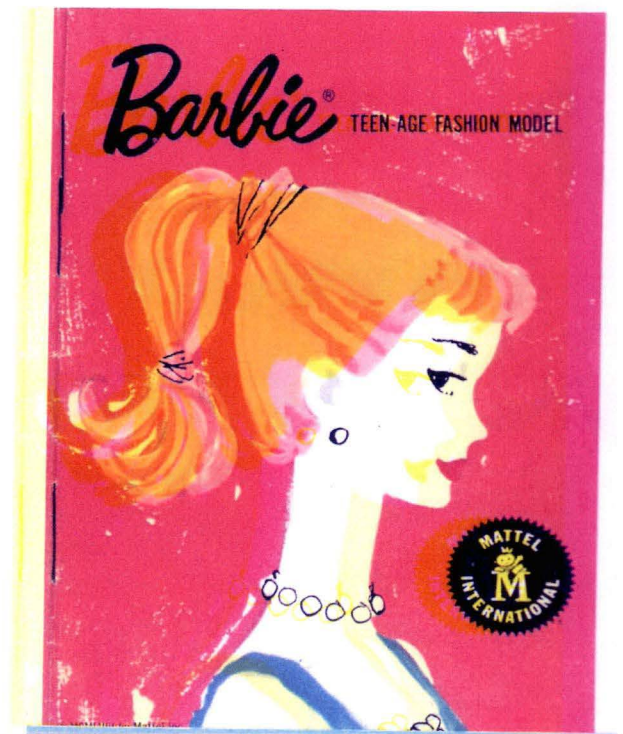
³⁵ Four Corners, A.B.C. Television. 6/3/2006

³⁶ Kline, Stephen: *Out of the Garden; toys and children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing*. Pp. 143-144 Verso: London 1993.

Doll faces play a large role in the work that I have constructed throughout this project. Where I have tried consciously to draw some themes from project to project, elements like *Ronald McDonald*, and the *Bananas in Pyjamas*, these met with limited success. The ubiquitous doll, however, looms large. It is not through laziness in collecting, or choosing not to look at the options. Frequently I find myself lost in a doll, sometimes lost in the draw of a mouth, at other times this classic object causes me to be lost in a chain of implications. The doll can, for me, be truly awesome. This depth of feeling reflects the process that drives collecting for me in this project.

Figure 3. *Mattel's Barbie* in her first outing.

The *Mattel* product *Barbie* encapsulates much of these qualities that draw me to the doll. As Joey Anuff writes about *Barbie*, an exemplar of the qualities that can be encultured within a toy, "Religion, sexuality, communication. *Barbie* can compete with any of the great religious symbols of our time. She is an active representative of consumerism, a spokesperson for the American economic system. She is a model for feminine appearance. She transcends national and language boundaries and is one of the most powerful teaching tools of our time. Everybody knows who *Barbie* is."³⁷



Barbie, however, is more than emblematic; she is a special type of object. A comparison might be made to small plastic reproductions of Michelangelo's *David*, or one of his *Pietas*. Each of these reflects the content in the original and may have strong personal significance for the person who possesses them. The object experience of a toy is different. There is no true *Barbie*, existing in some other

³⁷ Anuff, Joey: 'Barbie, Mattel and Censorship'.
In: <http://207.159.135.123/bbhold/censored/censored.htm>

space, of which all other *Barbie* dolls are a copy. Each *Barbie* doll is truly authentic, the one true doll, with all the cultural investment that this implies. Each *Barbie* doll is an object powerful in itself. This is the promise of the contemporary toy.

1.5 OTHER COLLECTED OBJECTS

Certain other groups of objects were selected for the project to illuminate notions about fetish. For the first work, *Artless*, neckties and pornography were selected to play against toys. Throughout the course of the project religious objects, although not themselves a fetish because of their object status, were used to reflect upon the spiritual element inherent in the idea of fetish.

Pornography was included to work through aspects relating to Freudian fetish in this project. The collecting of pornography acts to mediate the exploration of fetish in the project through the self. Whereas this fetish group reflects personal desire, the use of pornography also reflects upon the way in which the broader society deals with sex as a public issue. The public response to the *Artless* work, mediated through the outrage of a local newspaper, is an aspect of what Dennis Altman describes as 'Sex Panic'³⁸. The public makes a fetish of its outrage, certain types of private 'fetish' are seized upon as being powerful and scary and turned into public motifs of disdain. Camille Paglia believes that pornography, images of people having sex, are powerful because they are chthonic, that is that they are images of the impulse towards god at its most basic.³⁹ This causes a public reaction against depictions of people having sex, in a way that doesn't happen with other spheres of human behaviour such as violence. We even have a word for pictures of people having sex, pornography, which we then attach to other subjects that might displease, such as violence. This relationship that society has to images of people having sex, pornography, is one where the material seems to have some immanent power, to be a place where society puts things it doesn't wish to consider, and may therefore be thought of as a fetish for that society.

³⁸ Altman, Dennis; *Global Sex*. p55 Allen & Unwin: Sydney 2001

³⁹ Paglia, Camille; *Sexual Personae*. Pp 5,25-6 Penguin Books: London 1992

or two wide and about three feet long. It is certainly the most textured, decorative, expensive piece of cloth that many men would ever wear.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE IN FIELD

This project adds to a wide and ongoing examination of the understanding and function of fetish in contemporary society. The term fetish is seen to have been used widely, across a range of disciplines, both historically, and in the present.

In developing a sculptural exploration of the fetish, the project adds to the discourse on collected objects in contemporary art. The fetish is used to explore the hidden power of objects, that which drives their emergence in sculpture with Marcel Duchamp, and continues a presence in much contemporary art through collecting, and responses to and engagements with popular culture.

This work also adds to the contemporary practice of culture jamming, where the understanding of power objects and symbols allows them to be regrouped, recontextualised, with the aim of creating new opportunities for understanding.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT

A contemporary art context for this project is explored through those artists who have recognised or made reference to the idea of fetish in their work. This includes those artists who collect, and who search the world for objects that seem to resonate with an “authenticity”. Presentation of such objects may be about a quality of fetish. There are also those who try to construct a fetish, an object of power, where that power is extant.

ARTISTS

ANDY WARHOL

Andy Warhol’s work, through his use of repetition of what he felt to be iconic elements in popular culture, is relevant to this project. His repetition of the images of cultural heroes such as film stars and other famous persons is combined with more personal statements about what is iconic. Printed images of Campbell’s soup cans have developed the air of being iconic, but were originally sourced by Warhol as an expression of his own personal desire or craving. Warhol regarded Campbell’s soup as his favourite food, and had quite a fetish for it. Originally served to him by his mother, Warhol religiously returned to this American classic.

Figure 5. Barbie by Andy Warhol.

Andy Warhol was also an avid collector. He regularly trawled second-hand markets for objects from popular culture. His collection of cookie jars is perhaps the most notable in a range of obsessive collections.



In contemporary art it is Warhol who perhaps has done the most to draw attention to the sublimated content in popular culture. Others, notably Marcel Duchamp and the Surrealists, brought the readymade object into an art discourse⁴⁰. It is Warhol who took this attention to objects from the everyday world and turned it to popular culture. His work shows that objects and themes from popular culture, such as soup cans or celebrity, can be invested with content beyond that which is readily apparent.

WOLFGANG LAIB

It is the spiritual nature through ritual of Wolfgang Laib's collecting practice that informs this project. Laib collects material from the natural world, wax, pollen, milk, rice and stone, presenting these materials within an art context in a manner that emphasises their immanent qualities. Pollen is meticulously gathered in season from a variety of plants. The integrity of the material used in his work is of utmost importance. For Laib "content is equally embedded in the nature of the materials themselves as it is in its imagery."⁴¹ Collecting and presenting the material is enough for him.

The way in which Wolfgang Laib presents his artworks also reflects upon this project. His spiritually inspired collecting is presented in finished artwork in a simple way that gives resonance to the collected material, and further develops the idea of the material as having a spiritual content. As Anthony Bond writes, "the use of repetition underlies much of the work...and can be thought of as marking time or performing the ritual of a mantra that may assist us to take that journey of the soul."⁴²

ZOE LEONARD

Zoe Leonard's work, *'Mouth open, teeth showing'* shown at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, caused an immediate feeling of resonance with this project. Leonard has gathered nearly 700 dolls, which she presents standing on the floor of the gallery. The image in 'Art in America' is a large double page spread; there is a lot of space in and around the work. The figures are small, evenly spread in a loose

⁴⁰Oliva, Achille; *Vita di Marcel Duchamp*. Macino Marani Rome 1976

⁴¹ Bond, Anthony: *Wolfgang Laib; The Third Balnaves Sculpture Project*
Art Gallery of New South Wales 2005

⁴² Ibid

grid facing the viewer. My first impression of the work, and one which still endures, is the extraordinary faith shown by Leonard in her material. The dolls are presented just so. They are small, the space is large. They are simply gathered and presented. There is not a trace of theatricality, just a kind of rough order. The title of the work, 'Mouth open, teeth showing', comes from "doll collectors parlance for a valued feature of the early models made with smiling faces."⁴³ It reinforces the nature of the obsession with materiality that drives this kind of work. Not only to collect, but to know about this kind of collecting. Leonard would collect those dolls in 'played in condition', intrigued by the "psychosexual terrain ... the physical evidence of wear and alterations which together were tantamount to autobiographies."⁴⁴



Figure 6. Zoe Leonard. *Mouth open, Teeth showing*. Detail.

My interest in Leonard's work with relation to my project lies in her practice as an example of the process of collecting by contemporary artists. Her collection of dolls implies a habit of searching them out. That the dolls she collects are marked or damaged implies that she collects them from the 'lowest' sources, from garage sales, thrift stores and recycling depots. I imagine that this searching is a regular occurrence, that she is driven to do this, and that when she finds a doll that fits her

⁴³Stein, Judith; "Army of the Dolls" *Art in America*. February 2001

⁴⁴ Ibid.

own exacting requirements, she would experience delight and desire.

Leonard's manner of presenting her collected dolls reflects her regard for them as a sculptural material. Like Wolfgang Laib's pollen or rice works, the material is presented substantially as it is; the sculptor has faith in the resonant immanence of the objects used. For Zoe Leonard it seems that these dolls are objects that she is a little in awe of, and she wishes to show this by her respect for them.

JAKE AND DINOS CHAPMAN

Each of Jake and Dinos Chapman's works has caused me to reflect on my own art practice. Their large work *Babi Yar*, a scale model of the massacre of the Kievan Jews at the gorge of Babi Yar in 1941 is astonishing, both in its subject and in the detailed manner of its making. The whole is constructed of toy soldiers, reminiscent of a long and flourishing genre of small-scale military models. In Britain it would be possible to go to a new scale model exhibition of military figurines every week. Subjects in this field are rarely gory, consisting of costume, drama, heroics, perhaps the wounded soldier, like Michelangelo's dying Goth. The Chapman brothers' work however, is a construction in detail of hell. That this should be constructed of toy soldiers is extraordinary, as was their purchase of a set of Goya prints, which were altered and represented. A desire to engage with the ills of the world might be read into their interest in the horrors of the Holocaust and the Spanish popular resistance to Napoleon, but equally their interventions have attracted strong criticism. In discussing their work *Tragic Anatomies* 1996, which presents sexually mutated children, inspired in part by the dolls of Hans Belmer, Alyce Mahon suggests that the "erotic is employed by the artist as a deviant strategy to unsettle the viewers social, psychological and cultural assumptions, to incite a crisis on aesthetic taste and moral values."⁴⁵

The Chapmans source objects for their project that resonate with relevant context, are powerful, and they draw these into their practice.

Their exhibition in 2003, *The Chapman Family Collection*, demands to be considered as relevant to this project. This was a collection of carved wooden figures, a "tour-de-force of faultless fakery, comprising parodies of hand carved, Oceanic and Black African tribal masks and fetish objects"⁴⁶. The traditional motif

⁴⁵ Mahon, Alyce: *Eroticism & Art*. Oxford University Press. Oxford 2005

⁴⁶ Brown, Neal: "Burger Fetish". In; *Modern Painters*, Spring 2003.

on these figures has been overlayed with McDonalds imagery. Ronald McDonald's white pancake face sits atop a long necked totem. The Hamburglar

becomes a sinister figure of timber and wispy hair.

The Chapmans' work makes a direct correlation between the iconic and the fetishistic, which exists in McDonalds corporate imagery and that found in the traditional forms of Africa and Oceania.



Figure 7 The Chapmans eerie *Hamburglar*

CHAPTER 3

HOW THE PROJECT WAS PURSUED

This project was pursued initially through the process of searching for and collecting particular objects in order to create sculptural works that examine the nature of fetish. A fetish is by its definition nearly always an object or fixation found in the world. It is an object or practice that a person feels drawn to by the power in the thing that is a fetish. Toys as objects were the main focus of the



project, and an exploration of their qualities has led to a wider understanding of fetish.

Figure 8. Shopping for soft toys.

Toys have been chosen as a

particular vehicle for the project, but not all toys. Certain types of toys were chosen to tease out or express ideas about fetish. I wished to present these toys in a broader context of what fetish might be, and so other groups of objects were included, such as religious objects, ties and pornography. I started collecting.

I began by shopping. I had a set of constraints for the objects that I wished to collect, some practical, mostly to do with a personal sense of desirability in the object. These must be objects I felt compelled to engage with. Importantly, the objects needed to have been discarded. The discarded object carries for me a residue of its original owner that I find very desirable. If I bought a toy at an opportunity shop, or from the tip, I could guess that the original owner of the object had thrown it away or passed it on. Certain pre-owned objects seem to be imbued with magical potency and I had no desire for the new object in its plastic bag, fresh with a burger from a fast food outlet. The objects also had to be cheap. I wanted to collect in quantity, so I would pay no more than 50 cents for any object.

I set boundaries around the type of objects to be collected. I began collecting ties and it was preferable to collect thin ties of man-made fabric, preferably from either the *Rodney* or *Trevira* brands. In collecting pornography I tried to collect what I perceived as ‘amateur’ pornography, where the images are made initially for reasons that are not wholly commercial. In this material there may be a quality of engagement in the process for the subjects, as much as there may be desirable qualities in the images for a viewer. In collecting toys I concentrated on small plastic toys generally distributed as promotional objects through fast food outlets. These constraints were under pressure throughout the course of the project though, as I came across objects that had a different quality of desirability. Hand-knitted toys were definitely well outside the project as it commenced, but became important later on.

Throughout the collecting process I was reading pertinent literature. In exploring the idea of fetish I read widely, initially Piaget⁴⁷ and Winnicott⁴⁸ on transitional objects, trying to understand how a developing child might experience the object, and in particular toys. This reading led me to understand that all children experience objects as things that are powerful in their own right. Children focus on special types of inanimate objects, and will form strong emotional relationships with toys such as dolls. Reading Freud⁴⁹ and Loewald⁵⁰ showed me that this sort of relationship to objects could persist through to adult life. Bataille⁵¹ and Foucault⁵² suggest that this process could be read for societies as much as for individuals. Researching African and Oceanic spirituality offered insight into the nature of a fetish object in its original sense, and provided direction in establishing the form that the sculptures might take. This process of research through reading informed the process of collecting throughout the whole of the project and different types of objects were considered as exhibiting qualities relating to fetish.

Artless was the first work constructed and exhibited within the bounds of this project to explore fetish and the reality of the contemporary toy. I used a process I

⁴⁷ Piaget, J: *The Child's Conception of the World* Paladin. London 1973

⁴⁸ Winnicott, D.W: *Playing and Reality* Tavistock. London 1971

⁴⁹ Freud, Sigmund: *Totem and Taboo*. Routledge & Keegan Paul. London. 1987

⁵⁰ Loewald, H.W: *Sublimation; Inquiries into Theoretical Psychoanalysis*.
Yale University Press. New Haven and London. 1988

⁵¹ Bataille, Georges: *Theory of Religion* Zone Books New York 1992

⁵² Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality; Volume 1 An Introduction*
Penguin Books London 1990

have had some success with previously. Beginning with simple elements I constructed the piece throughout the course of its exhibition at Entrepot Gallery at the Centre for the Arts. I placed toys with other objects and images that could be defined through my research as exhibiting qualities of fetish. These were neckties and pornography. I sought objects that had a profound engagement with their users, objects that might test the range of fetish. I was also looking for objects that resonated for me with a sense of object desire. It was important that I should mediate choices describing fetish through the self.



Figure 9. Preparing *Artless* at Entrepot Gallery.

I had covered the walls of the gallery in black and white images of men having sex. Neckties were hanging from the ceiling, and in the middle of the space I placed an infant's high-chair, over which were tipped a large number of small plastic toys. Over the two weeks of the exhibition I added to the work; more pornography, more ties, more toys, building up an obsessive momentum within the work. Each of the collected elements represented a fetish that is peculiar to me. The image of the high-chair has occurred in several of my nightmares, and is an object of fear and awe.

I felt that this work succeeded on several levels. The quantity of material in the space provided an intense claustrophobic experience. It was a busy space; the eye couldn't rest, for everywhere there was content and detail. The conjunction of these

elements with an object that for me is redolent with awe, the high-chair, gave me insight into the socially invested power within the object.

The work *Barbarbanana* was constructed to develop the idea of a new toy. The found elements that make up this toy each contribute a quality of fetish to the finished work. Would my new construction have the same sense of fetish? The *Artless* piece received some press coverage, and I included this in the construction of the work.

Barbarbanana was constructed by simple bricolage. The head from a *Barbar the Elephant* toy was put on the body of a dark skinned *G.I Joe* type doll. The elephant headed toy could be read as a representation of Ganesha, the Indian god of wisdom, patron of taxi drivers, eternally infant.



This interest derives from a separate collection of elephant toys inspired by the Hindu belief that all such representations are full with god.⁵³ Indian religious objects can be thought of as falling between the idea of objects as a mnemonic device, and objects that are themselves immanent.⁵⁴ The torso of the *G.I. Joe* represents the body fetish which is apparent in both homosexual and heterosexual public culture.

Figure 10. *Barbarbanana*

The top from a smaller 'B1' figure was cut and glued into the doll's crotch to give *Barbarbanana* a big smiling erect penis. The graphic allusion of the *Bananas' in Pyjamas'* group of figure to the penis seems obvious. The Mercury newspaper's *Artshocker* front page was reduced on a photocopier to a scale appropriate for my doll to hold, and put in his hands to read. This graphically represents the public's fetish for difference expressed through popular media. However I felt that this path in exploring fetish too whimsical. The elements isolated the fetish apparent in the

⁵³ I spent 12 months in 1986/87 travelling in India to religious sites, talking with Shaivite sadhus'.

⁵⁴ Deneck, M.M: *Indian Sculpture; Masterpieces of Indian, Khmer and Cham Art*. Spring Books. London 1962

toys chosen to make the whole, but in making this new construct some quality of fetish existing in mass produced objects was lacking.

Lamb of God developed from two toys into a wall relief of coloured wax. An infant's chew toy, made with interlocking parts, has sat on my desk for several years. It is made of three interlocking elements. It features a bear with clip arms, joining links, and a tripartite clip section that closely resembles the international symbol for a biohazard. It seems to me that this biohazard symbol, like that internationally recognized for radioactive materials, performs a deep psychological function as well as being informative. It is a marker for terror, for death, more potent perhaps today than archetypal images of war, plague, or the devil. The image in my mind of children chewing upon this marker felt directly illustrative of how contemporary society consumes symbol and archetype. The fast-food/toy industry is driven to constantly present new material by commercial imperatives. Each of these toys is as loaded as the designer can make them. Each new toy is wanted, purchased, consumed and discarded in the period between fast-food meals. I wondered as to the loading of symbol with powerful emotional cues, and how this might work with the idea of fetish. The use of a chew- toy acts as a direct metaphor for this process of production and consumption of children's toys. The chew-toy is an object that a child engages with at a time when for them many objects are immanent⁵⁵. Through these transitional objects a child discovers things that aren't themselves, or their mother, but that are part of that mysterious, powerful 'other'⁵⁶. In many ways the regard that an infant has for an object encapsulates the idea of fetish.

The lamb figure is an older toy, and seems to carry no overly commercial content other than the fact of its manufacture. It does closely resemble images of the lamb of Christ, which carries a symbolic representation of Christ himself. This seemed a good choice of toy to give a Christian representation.

⁵⁵ Piaget, J: *The Child's Conception of the World*. Paladin. London 1973

⁵⁶ Winnicott, D.W: *Playing and Reality*. Tavistock. London 1971



Figure 11 Green Lambs' of God in the studio.

The elements of this wall work are made by construction of simple plaster moulds, which when dampened provide an excellent cast for work in wax. By working with wax, as with plaster, I feel a connection with a long history of sculpture making. The immediacy of the method, mixing colour, pouring, and assessing the results as they come out of the mould, are deeply satisfying.

I chose four colours for the biohazard elements of the work. These are representative of the four elements present in constructing genes, popularly capitalized as CGAT⁵⁷. The lamb is of green wax, symbolic of the new faiths, where resurrection and redemption are tied to technology and a focus on the 'natural' or 'organic' world.

I then entered into a process of collecting and reproducing doll faces. I would take the doll's head off, embed it in plasticine and then make a mould of the face. I began by making plaster moulds, some of which I left as raw plaster, and some I shellacked and into which I could pour wax, latex or fat. I became engrossed by the process of collecting doll faces. When I came across the magazine *Doll Digest*⁵⁸, and became aware of the range of faces used with the simple doll, I began to search out doll faces I considered representative of the generic doll, and yet also contribute

⁵⁷ The four nucleobases Cytosine, Guanine, Adenine and Thymine.

⁵⁸ Doll Digest.

to a sense of variety in a collection of doll faces. My obsession with toys had turned to doll faces. I still gathered toys widely, but the importance and strength of the doll face in my work was growing.

I tried a number of arrangements with these elements. I took moulds from a Buddha figure, moulded a torso and several mannequin faces. I considered playing a game with scale, doll faces with mannequin faces, doll ubiquity with Buddha spirituality. I considered at this time making work in the manner of the great 18th and 19th century English decorators, such as Grinlin Gibbons, using this figure to embellish a structure such as a mantle or ceiling rose.

The work *Faceless* began with the venue in which it was shown. Kelly's Garden, at Salamanca place, is a colonial yard, open to the sky and walled in convict cut sandstone. At either end of the yard there are elevated viewing points, so that work can be responded to as intimate objects that the viewer may walk around and through, but also as a broader canvas that can be viewed in its entirety from above. I wanted to present work that took advantage of both viewpoints.

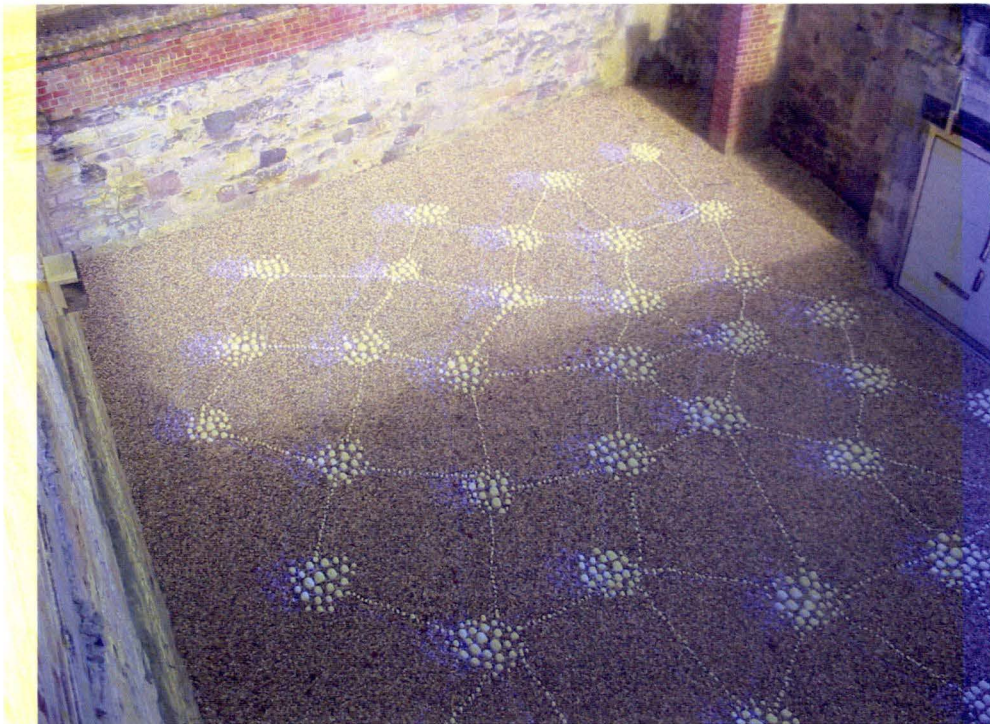


Figure 12. *Faceless* at Kelly's Garden (aerial view)

My attraction to plaster as a sculptural medium, its plain whiteness, and its immediacy as a sculptural medium and the offer of Kelly's Garden as a venue for exhibition, led me to making the faces themselves of plaster. The whiteness of the

plaster worked well with the stone surface of the garden; allowing the plaster to weather a little over the duration of the exhibition. The making of the plaster faces required a set of latex moulds. The head was embedded in plasticine, face up, and latex rubber is painted over the extant figure. Each face was coated three or four times with latex, and then was built up with cloth soaked in latex to give a robust mould.



Figure 13. Moulds with plaster jackets.



Figure 14. A tray of plaster faces.

A plaster jacket was then poured over the latex, to support the mould when used for casting. Forty face moulds were made and I poured into those that were finished as I made the next mould. I became engaged with the process, delighting each time I pulled the cast plaster face from the mould. The process of making allows my mind to race, as my hands are engaged I can consider all the associations that making faces brings. This loss of self in the object and its consequences can become manic, working quickly to draw more objects out, so as to reproduce the joy of discovery in the object.

My decision relating to the design for the placement of the faces within the venue was perhaps a little unorthodox. I asked a nine year old aboriginal boy, Jock Mundy, to draw me a design of how he thought the doll faces could be best placed in the yard. This allowed me to push the idea of a child's deep engagement with objects a little further. Jock drew up a design using the doll faces as dots, producing something that looks much like a central desert dot painting. Given Jock's upbringing as an urban aboriginal person, exposed to modern representations of aboriginal culture, this was a likely outcome.

This design allowed me to consider and present ideas about contemporary modes of thinking, interlinked and rhizomatous, rather than hierarchical. *Faceless* questions the nature of authorship, as my role as the author of this work is diminished by the found, commercial nature of the collected faces, and by the source of the patterning. So the title *Faceless* refers to the dubious authorship of the artwork presented.

My enthusiasm for the abstracted doll face carried through to another major piece. This new work used doll faces in an object in the round. Once again the presentation technique is that of the relief, but relief in the round, with faces decorating the surface of a column. Classical columns have become, of themselves, symbolic of a range of ongoing cultural values. Qualities of stability, conservatism, imperialism, the authority of the state, the passage of ideas over time, much is implied by the presence of classical columns, either as motif on a building or freestanding within a constructed space.



Figure 15. Placing a column at the Islington Hotel.

I decided therefore to construct the column in a classical manner. Photographs of classical ruins throughout Europe, Africa or the Middle East often feature temples with only columns standing upon their foundations. These earthquake prone areas are now testament to the solid way in which a classical Greek or Roman column was often constructed. Each column would be made of short sections, drilled through their centres. These were then stacked and molten lead poured through the central core formed by these stacked sections. This would pin the column, forming a strong bond, yet allowing some flexibility. My columns would replicate this process, made in sections, pinned with a core.

Construction of the column piece entailed three separate processes. Firstly, I made a set of plaster moulds of various doll faces. These I then painted with shellac to seal them and provide a clean resist. I could use these as press moulds for plasticine and I took a gob of plasticine and forced it into the mould, pulling out a perfect little face. I took a section of industrial cardboard tubing and covered this with plasticine. This provided a surface I could use to attach the separate plasticine doll faces.

Once the plasticine maquette was constructed, I took a mould from it in latex. Several coats of latex were painted over the plasticine surface, and then cloth reinforcing added, with more latex. The next step was to form a plaster jacket around the latex mould. This supports the form of the mould when subject to the considerable hydraulic pressures of large amounts of liquid plaster. This is the largest mould I have constructed, so the jacket needed to be reinforced with steel tubing. For each section I made a core of polystyrene, which was placed within the latex mould. I then poured plaster to fill the gap between mould and core. The polystyrene core reduces the mass of the individual elements and allows them to be easily pinned together.



Figure 16 *Column* at the Islington Hotel, Hobart

A lesson learnt in the construction of this work was the effect that linseed oil has on latex. To keep the latex mould supple over time it is preferable to oil it. I have always used vegetable oil, but in this instance I used linseed oil on this mould and then watched the mould slowly decay over the course of the project. Apparently the linseed oil reacts with latex to form lineolic acid, the latex reverting to a tacky gum. I enjoyed the results of this process; the mould degrading by degree as each column section was made.

As a completed work, *Gehenna* is presented as a close group of three columns, each of five sections. A single column was shown as a work in progress at the Islington Hotel, Hobart as part of the '*Eclipse of Reason*' show in May 2006. As a group of smaller columns and fallen elements, the work formed part of the set design for a production of Moliere's "*The Misanthrope*" at the University Playhouse in Hobart in June 2006.

The next work began with a re-focusing on a material that I had previously discarded. In collecting plastic toys at opportunity shops and garage sales, I would often see hand knitted toys stuffed in with the other children's objects. These were toys that I would push aside to get at the McDonald's treasures. I had begun a small work based on the *Bananas in Pyjamas*, and in hunting them down I began to keep the hand knitted soft toy *Bananas* that I came across. There was the possibility of contrasting the soft work with the original commercial plastic toys. The knitted toys were, however, developing a strong resonance of their own.

There are traditions and genres in soft toys, such as the teddy, the stuffed doll and

the knitted toy. Some are produced as part of marketing campaigns and given away by food companies just like their small plastic cousins.

I considered the hand-knitted soft toys to be a strong contemporary naïve art form. Each soft toy is a construction of love, something made by a mother, aunt, grandmother for a child, the reward being the joy given in passing on the object as a gift, perhaps with the desire that for the recipient, the beloved child, this object would be an object of power, of love. There is something particular which is strongest in those objects showing the lowest production values. The very daggy 'Banana' without a shirt, with loose and tortured knit work. The 'Teddy' which manages to have the air of the Bogan whilst being a creature of crochet. I can almost feel the difficulty of the makers, pushing themselves with an unfamiliar process, searching for a communion with some child they love by the labour of their hands. And yet their making fails. The fumbling, amateur efforts of the maker compete with the power and high production values of the market. I know this because I find their efforts for sale for twenty or fifty cents a piece at the Hobart City Mission Opportunity Shop. There is no truly economic market for the making of these objects in our culture. They are too labour intensive, their making is full of idiosyncrasies and hand knitted dolls are not greatly sought after as objects of desire.



Figure 17. Knitted soft toys.

Collecting is like a mantra. The verse is repeated, and with each purchase I am reminded of the emotional urge that accompanied the making. Each knitted toy is a gem, awaiting a pathetic deconstruction. The first attempt at making work with them was the neo-minimalist grid. I felt that the objects deserved to be treated with the confidence shown in Zoe Leonard's work. These dolls wouldn't stand and so I considered an installation on the wall. I took brown packing tape and made rings, so that I could stick them to the backs of the soft toys and then place them straight on the wall. With some of the larger dolls I used a small nail in the back as a hook.

I was dissatisfied with the resulting work. It looked attractive and although it gathered an audience who enjoyed describing or naming the dolls and making their own connections to individual pieces, I wondered whether this was mere illustrative sociology; something a museum might do. Returning the next day I found that half of them had fallen, kicked against the wall they sat in a big clump. Tape sprang out of the wall and dripped amongst those toys that remained. Excellent. It now resonated with an emotional connection.

The element inherent in the discard, the thrown away, had been reinforced. Perhaps it is through that element, where the work has fallen outside my control as the artist, that power has been restored to the objects. The objects have made a decision about arrangement and display, and this confirms for me their power. This represents a recognition of these objects as having a quality of fetish. By 'falling down', I could rationalise that these toys had made their own decisions about placement. When a person believes in the nature of the fetish, that person gives over some of their autonomy in the world. If objects can be powerful in their own right, if they might show their immanence, then the world is opened up to a relationship with these objects, malign or beneficent. That objects might choose to curse or bless you requires that you are a participant in that belief system. An acute anxiety about objects is important in choosing and collecting, as is an anxiety about placement and process.

Another discovery through this work was the aesthetic pleasure I found in the brown packing tape. I loved the chaotic element that this introduced to the work. By implication a toy could fall from the wall at any moment and it would challenge a viewer.

The next work drew its primary inspiration from that group of objects which first gave rise to the notion of the fetish. Traditional West African votive objects were

first seen by Portuguese sailors in the fifteenth century, wooden god objects heavily embellished with iron nails. Each nail driven into the votive object is a prayer, a meditation, a supplication to the power vested in the object.

I began with a wooden form in Huon pine. This timber in Tasmania has been given the appellation, 'sacred'. The great age of the timbers and their rarity is seen as representing qualities of the sacred in a new Green faith. When an object is made of a being thousands of years old it might draw qualities from a sympathetic magic, where age equates to wisdom, and thus the sacred.



Figure 18 *Fetish in process*

To this form I nailed soft plastic children's toys. I worked initially to cover the wooden surface with the coloured plastic toys. Their symbolic values I felt to be analogous with the carved form of the original African fetish. I tried largely to nail flat these plastic toys, mostly with success, but with some figures still remaining prominent. I had at this point a simulation of a votive object.

Working more nails into the form, I began with smaller nails, moving through to heavier gauge nails as I was forced to work further from the form by the mass of nails added. Over ten kilograms of nails have been hammered into the form.

Each nail in this work is a prayer. It was through this work that I would enable myself to continue with the project. Each day I would add a few more nails, each one with a name, a thought, a consideration as to its reason for being driven into my

votive object. As the nails became prouder from the surface of the form it would become harder to place and hammer the nails. I would gouge my knuckles, strike my fingers with the hammer, blood would splash the toys, the nails.

There is of course a problem in trying to create a fetish. A fetish is by definition an object that comes to the relationship with its own degree of power. An object that is a fetish is something that is found or sourced and then realized. To 'create' a fetish implies an autonomy on behalf of the maker that must diminish as the maker's success in creating a fetish increases.

I constructed a group of images as a meditation upon two areas that are central to a developed understanding of fetish; sex and god. Ironically, sex is generally viewed in culture as being the field of sublimation, of fetish, whereas it is the suppression of instinctive sexual desire which gives rise to alternate behaviors. The defining pool of sublimation is the urge to god, which Freud regarded as the highest order of sublimation. Again ironically, this activity is viewed culturally as pure. Questioning these assertions is the reason for making these works. In this work I am also unsure as to the role that toys play in my examination of fetish in the contemporary world, and so I placed them on the margins of the images.



Figure 19 *Fetish with nails*

Each image is constructed as a collage. I took an image of a socially constructed Christ, Catholic, soulful, white, and glued this to a board. These are images that I rescued, torn at the edges, faded perhaps, that can be found in a bin, or at the tip.

Using photocopies of Internet pornography, I cut out the figure and used these to construct a ground around the Jesus pictures. This disguises the tatty nature of the original material, as well as providing an opportunity to reflect upon the relationships being set up by this confluence of subjects. I then gave each a heavy varnishing, to protect the paper in the collage, and to give a sense of gravitas associated with old paintings. I found when I varnished the finished collages that by playing with both oil and water based varnish some illusion of depth could be given to the photocopied surround.

The circle of naked men around the 'Jesus' pictures reflects a view about the nature of self that is mediated through fetish. A circle of men screwing is called a 'monks circle'⁵⁹, a description both gratuitous and informative. Having sex with many men at the same time, or having sex with many different men over time can be thought of as base, where self is lost to desire or process and the behaviour can be thought of as pathological or addictive. It can also be thought of as a sacramental act. If objects are informed by the idea that they are immanent, that god lives in each thing and act, so too people can be thought of in the same way. Each man is immanent, each sexual act is immanent, and so the collage of screwing men couching Jesus represents a type of apotheosis, where mere men are raised to heaven, where they lose their selfness and soar through their collective immanence to a communion with god. This view of aspects of Christianity has been put forward many times before in history, and is a version of the Gnostic tradition.⁶⁰ It compares with the Hindu temple to the sun god at Konarak, which I have viewed, which is covered in a tiered writhing of heterosexual coupling and ecstasy.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Bath-house tradition.

⁶⁰ Johnson, Paul: *A History of Christianity*. p102 Penguin Books. London 1976

⁶¹ Watts, Alan & Elifson, Eliot; *The Temple of Konarak; Erotic Spirituality*. Thames & Hudson. London 1971



Figure 20 The Joseph picture, *Lux Et Tenebris*

Placing a toy-embossed frame around each work seemed at first to reinforce for me the marginal place perhaps that toys play in my work. The critiques of society and my peers seemed to have defined me as a 'gay' artist. A powerful social view is difficult to deal with when the making of work for the artist is conditioned by reading that society. The frames almost seemed as after thoughts, and yet, as I made each one and united it with its image, I felt a resolution to the works. I tried the first frame in gold; it married well with the almost Byzantine presentation of the infant Christ with Joseph. It surely is as DeSade wrote in '*Philosophy in the Bedroom*', "as man doth fuck, so he has willed that his Lord fucketh too; and the Lord did detach and send down out of Heaven this respectable part of himself".⁶² The doll faces used as a decorative motif on this frame are of the same group used in the *Faceless* work. For a somewhat greenish image of the adult Christ displaying his beating, bleeding heart, I surfaced the frame in flesh coloured latex. The doll heads in this case are taken from a variety of *Barbie* and *Sindy* dolls, cast in either profile, Janus like.

The final work for this project is concerned with how fetish develops within a local, public context. I had wanted to develop an original toy. The making of a new figure is redundant in a world where commercial concerns are engaged in an active, growing need to construct and market the latest toy. Given this, could I make a

⁶² DeSade, : *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings*. p 212
Arrow Books London 1991

figure that would have relevance, which would reflect upon my interest in the toy object as a fetish, in a contemporary art context?

I decided to engage with what I felt to be an urgent community issue, the possible presence of foxes in Tasmania, and the threat posed to the Tasmanian Devil population by facial sarcoma disease. I started with a Disney figure of their *Taz* character, which is a voracious, aggressive, tornado-like cartoon representation of a Tasmanian Devil. I first cast this toy in wax. Using wax and plasticine I then sculpted fox and devil features onto the face, enlarging the nose and chin, giving it horns and a cheeky tongue. From a latex mould of this resultant figure I then cast the final figure in plaster.



Figure 21 *Foxy-Devils* in the studio.

The tongue in the figure is thin, and some of these broke as they came out of the mould. In placing the mould in its supporting jacket, I had left the latex mould distorted on occasion. I felt both these errors worked well with regard to the project, opening up the idea that the objects have some power of their own. The distorted face in some of the figures deepens the relationship to the facial sarcoma faced by real Tasmanian Devils.

These figures were placed on buildings in and around central Hobart; I glued them to walls in the open and painted the figures to give some weather protection. The *Foxy-Devil* sports a bright cartoon colour, a devilish red skin and blue eyes.

CHAPTER 4

4.1 WORKS INCLUDED IN THE FINAL EXHIBITION

The work is presented for examination in three spaces within the Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts. The first of these spaces includes a number of individual works; each of the two other spaces contain discrete installations.

The viewer first has the opportunity to examine wall works and plinth mounted sculptures in the first space. The viewer then moves through a narrow room given over to the installation *Artless*. Exiting this installation, the viewer comes into the Tall Gallery, in which there is a second installation, *Gehenna*.

4.2 FIRST SPACE

This first space in the final examination contains six works. There are two wall-mounted installations, *Lamb of God* and *Soft Toys*, a set of three collages, *Jesus Pictures*, a set of three *Foxy-Devils* and two plinth mounted sculptures, *JohnJohn* and *Barbarbanana*.

The work *Soft Toys* presents hand-knitted or crocheted toys arranged loosely on the wall. These toys are attached with brown packing tape formed into loops at the back of each figure, allowing each toy to be attached to the wall. With some of these toys, the attachment has failed, and they lie where they have fallen, seemingly kicked against the wall. Tape springs from the wall in their absence.

Lamb of God is also a wall mounted installation. Green toy lambs, cast in wax, are couched in figures cast from an infants chew-toy, in blue, yellow and red wax. The chew-toy includes a connecting tripartite section resembling the international symbol for a biohazard; this reference is carried through in the construction of a cell-like pattern for the arrangement of the individual elements.

A set of three *Foxy-Devils* are mounted on the wall, lit by a single spot. These are plaster faces moulded from a Disney character, then sculpted with fox features. They are painted a bright red.

The *Jesus Pictures* are a set of three collages that hang together as a group. Each of the images, *Lux et Tenebris*, *Imitation of Christ*, and *Judas* appears as a framed collage. Central to each image is a found picture of Christ and an assemblage of gay male pornography. The frame for each collage is embossed with doll faces. Two of these have been painted gold, the third, *Imitation of Christ*, is surfaced with flesh

coloured latex. Each of these images is lit with a single spotlight.

JohnJohn is shown as a floor work. This sculpture closely resembles a traditional West African fetish, and is constructed as a short column covered with nailed toys. Over ten kilograms of nails, including square cut colonial nails and brand new galvanised nails, bristle from the surface. Elements of the nailed toys remain proud from the form, rising through the layered nails to peer out at the viewer.

JohnJohn sits on a short glass plinth, which in turn sits on a sheet of glass. This method of presentation, close to the floor, reinforces the work's animality and edginess. *JohnJohn* is lit with three spotlights.

Barbarbanana is a bricollage, assembled from parts taken from other toys to form a new object. It appears as a toy, sitting against the feet of a broken religious statue, mounted on a simple plinth. *Barbarbanana* is an elephant-headed action figure with a big penis, reclining, reading the newspaper. It is lit with a single spot.

4.3 ARTLESS

Artless appears in the final examination as a small room with an entrance and exit. It is entered from the first space, and the viewer exits *Artless* to enter the space occupied by the work *Gehenna*.

Entering the space through a narrow door, the viewer is confronted by a busy environment; the floor is strewn with toys, from the ceiling hang neckties, and the walls are covered with black and white photocopies of gay male pornography. In the middle of the room is a children's high chair, this too is strewn with toys, piled onto the seat and mounding about the legs.

The space is dim and claustrophobic. Following the observation of fetish objects and toys presented in the first space, the viewer is pushed up against these objects in this installation, and funnelled through to the next work. The viewer exits from another narrow door and moves directly from this rich environment to the much more subdued and open *Gehenna*.

4.4 GEHENNA

In the installation *Gehenna* I have represented two earlier works, *Faceless* and *Columns* to form a new work for the final examination. The floor of the gallery is covered in crushed limestone and nestled within this material are cast plaster doll

faces, arranged in a pattern reminiscent of a central desert dot painting. Clumps of faces are stitched together with narrow lines of smaller faces. The viewer walks through and around the installation.

Standing in the centre of the space is a group of three columns. Each column is constructed of 5 sections, stacked to a height of 3.2 metres. The column sections are constructed of cast plaster, the surface covered with doll faces. This space too is dimly lit, the group of columns being illuminated by a spotlight, which provides sufficient light for the entire installation.

CONCLUSION

Fetish is seen through the project to be a valid pathway to examining certain objects in the contemporary world. The idea of fetish informs the process of collecting, and can be presented as an aspect of sculptural practice. Through the course of this study I have felt reinforced in the idea that the children's toy acts as a fetish. These are material objects within a material world, yet immanent objects, things that are viewed by the person fully engaged with them as being imbued with a power that draws its own boundaries for relationship. I feel that the toys major route to distribution, the fast food industry, only completes this view. As immanent objects, the toy functions also as a locus of addictivity; these are " ..the transcendental aesthetic of the thing to be eaten."⁶³ By consuming the fetish, a god filled object, there is the opportunity to become god filled, to escape, and to achieve transcendence. Immanent objects are special.

I have become more aware of how my regard for what I feel as the immanence of objects affects the entirety of my world-view. The process of falling into a relationship with an object is the same as that which drives a process of falling into behaviours, habits or ideas. I have learnt through this project that the relationship with objects, primarily with toys, was the first of these relationships, before those relationships with more complex sublimated behaviours. Future projects will explore more deeply my own attachment to objects, a process that will allow me to further my interrogation of the part that fetish plays in contemporary society through personal engagement.

⁶³ Ronel, Avital. *Crack Wars*. 1992

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1. Nail Fetish of the Loango Coast. Von Boehn, Max: *Dolls*. p.52 Dover Publications Inc. New York. 1972
2. Tinky-Winky, Laa-Laa, Po and Dipsy
 3. Mattel's Barbie in her first outing. BillyBoy: *Barbie; Her Life & Times*. Crown Trade Paperbacks 1987
 4. Anonymous net porn
 5. *Barbie* by Andy Warhol BillyBoy: *Barbie; Her Life & Times*. Crown Trade Paperbacks 1987
 6. Zoe Leonard, *Mouth open, Teeth showing*. Detail. Stein, Judith E: "Army of the Dolls." In; *Art in America*. February 2001
 7. The Chapman's eerie Hamburglar
 8. Shopping for soft toys
 9. Preparing *Artless* at Entrepot Gallery
 10. *Barbarbana*.
 11. Green Lambs of God in the studio
 12. *Faceless* at Kelly's Garden
 13. Moulds with plaster jackets
 14. A tray of plaster faces
 15. Placing a column at the Islington Hotel
 16. Column at the Islington Hotel, Hobart
 17. Knitted soft toys.
 18. *Fetish* in process.
 19. *Fetish* with nails.
 20. The Joseph picture, *Lux et Tenebris*
 21. *Foxy Devils* in the studio

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2001 *The Shed* CAST Gallery, Hobart

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